

Date: May 18, 2020

To: Kevin Hovey, Caltrans – District 11 Environmental

From: Gail Getz, Environmental Planning Manager, County of San Diego Department of Public Works

Subject: 13th Street Bridge Project Visual Impact Assessment Memo

Purpose

This memorandum addresses the potential impacts of the proposed project on visual resources and supports the conclusion that an abbreviated or fully-developed visual impact assessment (VIA) is not required as determined by completing Caltrans's Questionnaire to Determine VIA level (available: <https://dot.ca.gov/programs/design/lap-visual-impact-assessment/lap-via-questionnaire>). The project was determined to have a VIA level score of 13 points, which means that a brief memorandum is sufficient for evaluating all potential project-related impacts and providing a rationale why a technical study is not required. The following memo describes the proposed project, the existing setting, and all potential and less than significant environmental impacts.

Project Description

The proposed 13th Street Bridge Project is located on 13th Street and Maple Street between Main Street (SR 67) and Walnut Street in the unincorporated community of Ramona. The project segment of 13th Street/Maple Street is a dirt roadway, with gravel at the Santa Maria Creek culvert crossing. The existing, undersized corrugated steel culvert does not have sufficient capacity to convey the creek water during storm events; flooding at this crossing makes the roadway impassable for motor vehicles and pedestrians during portions of the rainy season.

The objective of the project is to provide an adequate and safe crossing that allows for the conveyance of water from a 100-year storm event. The project would include replacement of the existing culvert crossing with a bridge designed to meet current federal standards, with roadway improvements along 13th Street/Maple Street and Walnut Street, and the addition of stormwater conveyance and treatment features that would ultimately discharge into Santa Maria Creek.

The proposed bridge would be a 4-span cast-in-place pre-stressed, post-tensioned concrete box girder structure, approximately 480-feet long and approximately 42-feet wide with three singular-column bents and two abutments. The bridge and approaches would include two 12-foot travel lanes, 3-foot shoulders on each side, and an approximately 8-foot wide multi-use pathway to accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians. In addition, three bridge barriers with a total width of approximately 4-feet, consisting of two edge deck rails and one pedestrian barrier would be installed to separate pathway users from the travel lane and creek. The pathway across the bridge would connect to the existing southern segment near the Ramona County Library and transition users across the bridge to existing and planned facilities north of the bridge. The grade of 13th Street/Maple Street would be raised approximately 10-feet at the Santa Maria Creek crossing to comply with current Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) requirements.

Storm drain systems are proposed directly to the north and south of the bridge to capture runoff and direct it towards the existing creek. Permeable pavement areas would be incorporated into the project as Green Street features to facilitate meeting water quality requirements and for storm-water management.

An existing bio-retention basin located south of the bridge that currently treats stormwater from the library and associated parking lot would be redesigned to continue treating those existing areas in addition to the proposed paved roads south of Santa Maria Creek. Construction is anticipated to last approximately 12 months.

Project Setting

The project area (project impact area or PIA) includes road improvements to 13th Street and Maple Street between Main Street and Walnut Street, including construction of an approximately 480-foot long bridge over Santa Maria Creek in the unincorporated community of Ramona. Santa Maria Creek transects 13th Street/Maple Street (by way of a corrugated steel culvert) and parallels Walnut Street to the south. 13th Street, Maple Street, and Walnut Street are two-lane undivided roadways and the project site comprises both paved and unpaved sections of road.

The culverted section of 13th Street/Maple Street is unpaved, however, there is an approximately 250-foot long segment of paved roadway immediately north of Main Street, adjacent to the Ramona Library. The project area also includes an approximately 800-foot long, westbound section of road on Walnut Street, just north of Santa Maria Creek. There is an unpaved section of Walnut Street to the east of the intersection, which dead-ends approximately 600 feet east of Maple Street. There are currently sidewalks along the northern side of eastbound Walnut Street and along the western side of northbound Maple Street. In addition, there are sidewalks on the southern section of 13th Street adjacent to the Ramona Library, however, the sidewalks terminate at the library's parking lot. There are no sidewalks within the unpaved sections of 13th Street/Maple Street and Walnut Street.

Santa Maria Creek contains mature cottonwood-willow riparian forest habitat. Santa Maria Creek flows intermittently from east to west along the northern portion of the project area and is fed year-round by urban runoff, and precipitation/storm water runoff during the wet season. The project area is relatively flat with a man-made earthen berm along the northwest portion of Santa Maria Creek and a row of boulders situated along the southeast portion of the creek.

Developed and disturbed land occurs to the northeast, northwest, and southwest and disturbed non-native grassland occurs to the southeast. Adjacent developed land consists of industrial and commercial (automotive body repair, towing yards, propane sales, wrecking yard and solid waste collection/transfer) uses. Beyond these areas are single family residential, horse keeping, and minor agricultural uses. To the south of the proposed bridge is the Ramona Branch Library. A man-made detention basin is located north of the Ramona Library parking lot.

Methods

In order to evaluate project-related visual impacts, a site visit was conducted by County staff on (February 6, 2018). The assessment of the project site's visual resources also relied on the project's Natural Environmental Study (May 2020) which includes information on the project's environmental setting.

Visual Impact Assessment

The proposed project includes the construction of an approximately 480-foot long bridge, approximately 42-feet wide with three singular-column bents and two abutments. The grade of 13th Street/Maple Street

would be raised approximately 10-feet at the Santa Maria Creek crossing. The bridge and approaches would include two 12-foot wide travel lanes with 3-foot wide shoulders on each side, and an 8-foot wide multi-use pathway. In addition, three bridge barriers with a total width of approximately 4-feet, consisting of two edge deck rails and one pedestrian barrier would be installed to separate pathway users from the travel lane and creek. The bridge barriers would be concrete with a metal railing placed on the top as a safety requirement, and due to the rise in grade for the bridge, a metal beam guard rail would be installed at the southwest corner of the intersection. South of the bridge, a split rail wooden fence would be installed adjacent to the pathway and terminate at the Ramona Library parking lot. The proposed project would also include storm drain systems to the north and south of the bridge, permeable pavement areas within the roadway, and the redesign of an existing bio-retention basin located north of the Ramona Library parking lot.

The proposed project would result in a noticeable change in the physical characteristics of the existing environment as the undersized culvert would be replaced by a bridge. The dirt roadway would be paved, continue to stay on the existing alignment, and there would be no additional lanes, however, there would be a 10-foot rise in the roadway elevation at the creek crossing. While the bridge itself will be a noticeable change in the surrounding setting, the piers and abutments would likely be obscured by the roadway and surrounding riparian corridor. Additionally, the storm drain systems and permeable pavement areas would not be visible project components and would likely blend in with the roadway and bridge improvements.

Although the bridge would be approximately 480 feet long, this length is required to preclude extensive channel grading as well as to accommodate the 100-year design flood with a “no rise” condition. Previous alternatives looked at shorter bridge lengths, however, they would require significant channel grading and include a greater temporary loss of vegetation, which would result in an increase of visual and biological impacts. While the proposed bridge length is relatively long, there would be less of a visual impact than the shorter bridge alternatives because there would be less disturbance to the surrounding channel and vegetation.

There would also be some noticeable visual changes from the proposed project. The dirt roads within the project area would be paved, however, this would be a visual improvement as it would connect to the paved roads to the north and south of the project area. The concrete bridge barriers (Type 732 and 732SW) with metal railings (Type 7) would be new additions to the project area, however, the surrounding properties to the north and south have chain link fences, and the fences to the west of the project site have privacy screens and slats installed. In addition, concrete columns adorn the property entrances along the west side of 13th Street, so the addition of the concrete barriers and metal bridge railings would not contrast with the current visual surroundings of the project area. Also, the split rail wooden fence that would be installed adjacent to the decomposed granite pathway would be an appropriate design choice for the proposed project as the materials and design would be consistent with the rural visual character desired by the Ramona community.

The Ramona Community Plan states that the community vision is to preserve the “rural ambiance while accommodating and managing economic and residential growth” and Land Use Goal 1.1 (regarding

community character) states “the rural atmosphere of the Ramona community is preserved and enhanced, while encouraging a balance of land uses that are compatible with a country lifestyle.” The proposed road improvements and bridge are not anticipated to have any design elements that would be expected to have a negative impact on the community character of Ramona. Additionally, connecting the proposed roadway, pathway, and sidewalk improvements to the existing facilities located to the north and south of the project area would complement the visual character desired by the Ramona community.

The proposed project would result in permanent and temporary impacts to mature native riparian vegetation; permanent impacts would either be mitigated on-site or off-site, and temporary impacts would be restored on-site with a native plant pallet through a formal landscape planting plan. After construction, the temporarily impacted areas would be restored to pre-impact conditions or better, and the revegetation with native species would complement the existing visual character of the project area. Removal of nonnative plant species and revegetation with native plants would help restore the project site to a more natural condition, making it more consistent with the rural aesthetic of the Ramona community. A conceptual mitigation plan will be prepared to address the on-site mitigation proposed for the project.

Review of the project site and project plans indicate that the proposed project features such as the bridge, roadway, pathway, and sidewalk improvements, and the Green Street features would not result in substantial impacts to the visual environment. Possible viewer groups that may be affected by the proposed project include motorists along 13th Street, Maple Street, and Walnut Street, business owners, pathway and trail users, and Ramona Library visitors. During construction, 13th Street would be closed to motorists within the project area and no detour would be necessary due to the low traffic volumes along the existing unimproved roadway, so there would be a minor temporary disruption to the community during construction.

Motorists accessing nearby businesses or the library would be transient viewers and would only have a slight, short-term view of the construction site. The business owners immediately to the west of 13th Street may be affected by construction of the project as the roadway passes in front of their property, but access would be maintained throughout construction. Library visitors are likely to see the construction site, especially from the parking lot, however, it would be a temporary visual impact until the bridge is completed. Once the project is complete, the same viewer groups would benefit from the visible changes as the dirt road would be paved, the bridge would adequately convey storm water, and pathways and sidewalks would connect to the existing facilities located to the north and south of the project site, resulting in visual improvements.

The proposed road improvements and bridge are not anticipated to have any design elements that would be expected to have a negative impact on the community character of Ramona. Additionally, connecting the proposed roadway, pathway, and sidewalk improvements to existing facilities would complement the visual character desired by the Ramona community. Therefore, the proposed project would not alter the rural character of the site. Additionally, after construction, the project site would be revegetated with native species that would complement the existing visual character of the project area. Therefore, the proposed project would not adversely affect any “Designated Scenic Resource” as defined by CEQA statutes or guidelines, or by Caltrans policy.